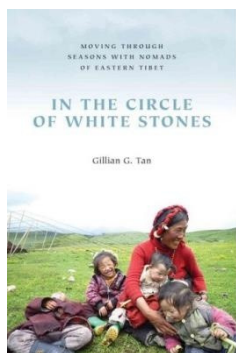


REVIEW: *IN THE CIRCLE OF WHITE STONES*

Konchok Gelek (Dkon mchog dge legs དཀོན་མཆོག་དགེ་ལེགས།
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Gillian G Tan (Stevan Harrell, Foreword). 2017. *In the Circle of White Stones: Moving Through Seasons with Nomads of Eastern Tibet*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. xxii + 147 pp, 3 kinship charts, 2 maps, a diagram of pastoral movement, 18 photos, glossary, index. ISBN 9780295999470 (hardback 67.82USD); 9780295999487 (paperback 23.51USD); ASIN: B01MRT6KFN (Kindle 14.73USD)

Gillian G. Tan's² experience in the pastoral community of Dora Karmo 'White Stone Circle' is reflected in the title of the book under review. Circles of white rocks are characteristic of the local landscape, hence the name. Dora Karmo is home to a group of herders who are part of a larger community of herders known as Nalungma. Administratively, this community is located in Lhagang (Tagong) Township, Dartsedo (Kangding) County, Ganzi (Dkar mdzes) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China.

This book is a reality show of contemporary Tibetan nomad life - a package featuring the nature of nomadic life, external changes stemming from the government's development campaign, the booming caterpillar fungus economy, social problems and challenges, and a Buddhist leader's role in the development of the local community. Each component is an inseparable part of the whole in the local community.

In his foreword, Stevan Harrell praises Tan's narrative of participating in the community, sharing life experiences with a family

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² In 2017, Gillian G. Tan held a position as Lecturer in Anthropology at the Geelong Waurin Ponds Campus of Deakin University in Australia (<http://bit.ly/2saHdZb>, accessed 4 June 2017).

living in a harsh environment, and interacting with a charismatic lama who dedicates his time for improvement of local education. Harrell sees this book as filling some gaps in Westerners' knowledge of Tibet and voicing an alternative narrative of Tibet to that given in newspapers and political articles. The Tibet Tan depicts "[preserves] in print the humanity of the common people of Tibet" (x).

Tan's curiosity about pastoral culture and language is obvious in her reported observations and experiences. The text's articulation of the daily lives of herders and how they are changing within the framework of global change places it outside the genre of travel diary. The author's use of detail could not have been imagined, but only have come from lived experience. As Tan points out, "this book presents two different views of Tibetan life" (xii). One is a portrayal of locals' daily lives, and the other is the author's interactive experience during her stay in this community. Tan conveys relations, perspectives, personalities, and tales of the people of Dora Karmo through conversations and dialogue, helping to bring the book to life, distinguishing characters, and adding value.

However, there are times when Tan's prose leads to excursions that create a text that goes beyond plain description, e.g. (23-24):

For some nomads, a desire for cash is accompanied by transformations in their relationships with entities of the physical environment, including yaks and territorial deities. While these kinds of transformations should not be viewed as "loss," in large part to avoid romantic essentialism regarding "Tibet" and "nomadism," there is some truth to the idea that the desire for cash comes at the expense of the relationships that fuel its creation, echoing Anna Tsing's (2013) point that the power of *other* activities and networks that are not themselves regarded as "capitalistic" and are jeopardized as a result of this power.

This use of academese is unclear to this reviewer, especially in contrast to most other sections of the book that I found clear and straightforward. What exactly, are/were these relationships with local entities? How were they transformed? What are some examples of these *other* activities and networks and how do they relate to the concerns of this book?

Tan presents herself as a foreign, international aid worker and anthropologically inclined researcher who periodically visited the community in the years 2006, 2007, 2010, and 2013 in a quest "to learn more about Tibetan nomad culture and nomad dialect..." (7). The journey begins with exploring the possibilities of living with a local family for a half-year. This becomes possible with the help of a friend and, given the dramatic social changes in the offing, is probably her last opportunity to experience the herding way of life in this particular community.

Her conversations with educated Tibetans illustrate certain attitudes toward change. For example, Tan's friend says:

Tibetan culture has been influenced by external forces for most of history, but we have always had the choice to accept the beneficial things and to reject unnecessary aspects. Now change is happening so quickly that culture is approached from all sides. The people who are making change are not the culture holders. And I think the most important thing we can do is to allow people to think and choose among the new things that are coming into Tibetan society (8).

Tan employs the Tibetan name, Nyima Yangtso, which was given by a Tibetan lama in New York. He also introduced her to Dorje Tashi, an influential, local incarnate lama from Dora Karmo, who plays a significant role in the local community.

Tan recalls her failed attempt to live with a herding family in another county some years earlier due to altitude sickness and loneliness. Regretful about this experience, she resolves to have a more successful experience this time around.

Tan starts her pursuit of learning about local pastoral culture and language down a bumpy dirt road leading to the remote community. Aku Kungo is the head of her host family, which also includes his two daughters, Daka and Padka. The latter is married to Tsering Panjur from a nearby community.

Everything is fresh and new for Tan. This novelty is mutual, as Daka and Padka curiously observe Tan unpack a sleeping bag and headlamp. Though Tan has some Tibetan language background, the nomad dialect proves challenging as she realizes that the Tibetan she

had often heard from educated Tibetans was modified to accommodate her language level. Natural speech in real life, she realizes, is quite different.

Tan insightfully describes her host family's mundane daily activities, including making *tsampa*, fetching water, milking yaks, and collecting dung. She participates in daily chores and assists Padka with herding livestock while learning the names of local mountains and mountain deities.

The rapidly increasing value of caterpillar fungus makes it a major part of a household's income. Tan joins the caterpillar fungus collection group. Although the locals are primarily pastoralists, income from the sale of caterpillar fungus means less dependency on animal husbandry and feeds a desire for new commodities such as mobile phones, motorcycles, and even cars.

Collecting caterpillar fungus also provides opportunities to socialize after the long cold winter months. The caterpillar fungus collection season is a time when livestock are weak after a long, cold winter. There was little dairy work. This was a good time for collectors to leisurely gather on mountains, share information, and gossip.

When the family moved to different camps in the winter, spring, and autumn pastures, they showed concern for the environment. For example, they did not choose the same location to set up their tent two years in a row in order to allow vegetation to recover in that area. Tan's details of helping her host family pack, unpack, and pitch their tent, as well as information on the seasonal moves of neighboring families adds interest and authenticity to her book. The ensuing clusters of black tents resemble giant black spiders on the grassland.

Livestock dictate the nomads' way of life and Tan becomes sufficiently conditioned to the cold, tough environment that she volunteers to milk, graze, churn butter, and make yarn.

Summer is the busiest time of the year. Summer mornings are long and busy. Butter is a vital part of their diet and also acts as an offering to the local monastery. Churning butter alone is a time consuming and daunting task. In the evening, women store freshly-produced chunks of butter in buckets containing cold spring water. A churning machine from Qinghai Province makes this task easier. Nevertheless, mornings remain a very busy time for women. The

afternoons provide women with some time for themselves and the children. It is also a time to visit neighbors and friends for tea and *tsampa*, as well as share news and gossip.

Men collect medicinal herbs, sell animal products, and purchase commodities in town where they obtain the latest news on prices for caterpillar fungus and other local products. At the time of Tan's visit, motorcycles were an important form of transportation, allowing men to travel further, faster, and more frequently. Tan's host family also has a motorcycle, purchased with caterpillar fungus income.

Summer is the best season on the grassland. Horseracing festivals of various sizes are held in Tibetan herding areas. Tourists, both domestic and foreign, visit the grassland to enjoy the natural beauty and cultural events. Tourism brings money-making opportunities, but also detracts from horseracing festivals as a time of community participation and self-entertainment. For example, horseracing festivals in Lhagang and Goroma seem to be performances for tourists. The remote region of Nanglangma, an area adjacent to Dora Karmo, has a horse race without tourists, which retains a semblance of authenticity despite the presence of a few foreigners and development aid workers.

The author observes rapid changes in the lives of herders as the government implements its Xibu Dakaifa 'Develop the West Campaign'. She also observes death and loss of loved ones. Locals have suffered from bloody revenge feuds for generations. Young men fight as the result of misunderstandings, over caterpillar fungus harvest resources, and other unresolved feuds. Violence ignites new revenge feuds. The death and loss of relatives and friends are frequent.

Seasonal changes, moving between camps, and experiencing death and loss emphasize the impermanence of the pastoralists' world. Locals understand the meaning of impermanence well through their own experiences. The reality of their daily lives exemplifies the teaching of Tibetan Buddhism: happiness, suffering - nothing lasts forever.

Padka gives birth to a baby girl who dies before she is six months old. It is painful for Padka to lose her baby. However, she accepts reality, commenting, "We work, we live, we die. Life is like that" (85).

Tan also visits Larung Gar, the largest Buddhist teaching college in Tibet, where she witnesses a sky burial. She describes the process of sky burial in great detail. It exemplifies everyone's final destination - decayed flesh and bone fed to hungry vultures is a reminder of the impermanence of life. Tan's reflections on sky burial give insight into how nomads view life and death. For example, Tan tells a tragic story of an old woman who grieves over the loss of her husband, son, and son-in-law, yet her acceptance of impermanence as reality alleviates her pain in life. This widow believes death is not an end, just a part of a cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

As an aid worker, Gillian pays attention to community development that is initiated by the grassroots philanthropist, Dorje Tashi. A chapter devoted to Dorje Tashi covers topics such as the school enrollment issue, local project objectives, challenges of the new school, community engagement, future vision of Dorje Tashi. His understanding of local people and his role in his community as a religious leader allows him to bring about change, not as a passive recipient, but as an active adaptor to change.

Dorje Tashi, is a charismatic, visionary leader, and an incarnate lama. He established the Xikang Welfare School in 1997, raises funds from his wealthy Han Chinese disciples to serve his community, and builds a new boarding school for Dora Karmo and the adjacent area. After the school is completed, Dorje Tashi holds a grant ceremony. People attend wearing holiday costume. Monks, government officials, and his Chinese disciples are also present. Locals trust this monk with their children and dare to leave them in this isolated boarding school based on that trust. During school registration, children cling to their parents because they do not want to go to school. Both children and parents struggle with their tears. Tan's host family's children are also enrolled.

Dorje Tashi insists on having qualified Tibetan language teachers from Qinghai Province rather than accepting official government teachers who are unqualified. He also devised novel ways of caring for students, such as arranging new students into groups of six and then assigning older students from Xikang Welfare School to care for the younger students in the newly-opened primary school.

Dorje Tashi also understands change and acts on it in his own way: "Change comes, and [other] people will come. We need the methods for [dealing with] it; change comes whether you like it or not" (109). By applying his methods, he is able to expand the new boarding school from 600 students in 2006 to almost 1,400 in 2013. He has even bigger plans for local education and dreams of establishing a university that teaches Tibetan culture and language.

Tan also faces some personal travails. She is hurt and angry when Aku Kungo remarks that she is a Gyamo 'Chinese woman'. Tan uses a Tibetan name and speaks some of the local dialect, yet, the remark alienates her from the others in the tent. I suggest, however, that she overreacted. "Gyamo" is actually a broadly-applied term, for example, it might be used to designate any non-Tibetan woman. A white Western woman might be called Gyamo and in some cases, a fashionably dressed Tibetan woman might also be indicated with the same term.

As a native Tibetan, I find Tan to be insightful and realistic. Unlike some outsiders' perspectives, the author is part of the story, a member of the community, which serves the purpose of this book well. Tan builds personal relationships with locals, e.g., "I was in a domestic relationship with a Tibetan man from Dartsedo" (xii), which makes her a member of a family, a part of the local society. In this sense, she is more local than outsider.

Seven years pass and Tan returns to Dora Karmo to encounter changes that are so great that she feels it is her first visit. Readers will need to read the book to learn what changed in the years that she was absent.

Tan captures the interplay of the topics mentioned above in telling a story of a herding family. Her use of plain English will appeal to a general audience, while those more interested in ethnography and its frameworks may find her occasional use of academese attractive.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *In the Circle of White Stones* and its depiction of the reality of a Tibetan herding way of life, which sent me back to memories of smoky black yak-hair tents, ever-hot adobe stoves, the sounds of cheese-making, and images of resilient Tibetan herders.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS¹

Aku Kungo, a khu kun go ཨ་ཁུ་ཁུན་གོ།
 Daka, zla mkha' ལྷ་མཁའ་།
 Dartsedo, dar rtse mdo དར་རྩེ་མདོ།
 dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས།
 Dora Karmo, rdo ra dkar mo རོ་ར་དཀར་མོ།
 Dorje Tashi, rdo rje bkra shis རྡོ་རྗེ་བཀྲ་ཤིས།
 Ganzi 甘孜
 Goroma, sgo ra ma གོ་ར་མ།
 Gyamo, rgya mo གྱ་མོ།
 lama, bla ma ལྷ་མ།
 Larung Gar, bla rung sgar ལྷ་རུང་སྐར།
 Lhagang, lha sgang ལྷ་སྐང་།
 Nanglangama, nangs langs ma རྣངས་ལངས་མ།
 Nyima Yangtso, nyi ma g.yang mtsho ཉི་མ་གཡང་མཚོ།
 Padkar, pad dkar པད་དཀར།
 Qinghai 青海
 Sichuan 四川
 Tagong 塔公
 tsampa, rtsam pa ཅུམ་པ།
 Tsering Panjur, tshe ring dpal 'byor ཚེ་རིང་དཔལ་འབྱོར།
 Xibu Dakaifa 西部大开发
 Xikang 西康

¹ At times, the Tibetan transliterations in the text were unclear, consequently, I have given what I imagined the transliterations alluded to.